

Fire ruins dining area of Chez Panisse

MAR 8 1982

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BERKELEY — A pre-dawn fire ignited by smoldering charcoal caused about \$100,000 in damage to Chez Panisse, an internationally acclaimed restaurant in North Berkeley, fire officials reported.

The 5:20 a.m. Sunday blaze originated in a charcoal bin outside the kitchen and spread to a storage area, the dining area and the upstairs cafe before Berkeley firefighters brought it under control about 40 minutes later.

Alice Waters, founder and co-owner of the restaurant at 1517 Shattuck Ave., known for its innovative "California cuisine," said that the dining room was ruined and that the upstairs cafe sustained heavy smoke and water damage.

A sprinkler system in the kitchen "prevented it from being burned up," she explained.

Walls separating the dining room and the kitchen were destroyed. Mirrors, light fixtures and redwood booths were also ruined by the blaze.

A wall to the exterior was removed because firefighters feared that flames were still burning inside it.

Valuable 1930s-era posters from the films of Marcel Pagnol sustained only minor damage from the fire, Waters said. However, the frames housing the posters suffered severe damage, as plexiglass materials in the frames were melted by the heat.

Waters credited the alertness of a night watchman in a nearby hotel, and the quick response of the fire department, with saving the building from worse damage. She later sent flowers to the fire department for its efforts.

"Nobody was hurt and the building was saved, so I guess we were lucky," she said.

The Berkeley Fire Department responded to the scene with 15 firefighters and five vehicles, bringing the one-alarm blaze under control by 6 a.m., according to fire department spokesman Gary Allen.

Waters projected that, "with a miraculous work effort," the upstairs cafe may re-open in one week. Revamping the main restaurant will take a month or longer.

"We're going to rebuild it as quickly as we can," she said, "but it means having to rebuild the entire dining room, and certainly repairing and repainting the entire cafe."

Chez Panisse has received plaudits since opening its doors in 1970. It was heralded by Playboy magazine in 1980 as one of the finest restaurants in the country.

More recently, San Francisco magazine, in its January 1982 issue, ranked the restaurant as one

of the top two restaurants in the Bay Area, in a first-place tie with Le Castel of San Francisco.

Chez Panisse "pioneered a style of French cooking that today has dozens of imitators," San Francisco magazine reported.

That style integrates French methods of cooking with the freshest ingredients and foodstuffs of California, thus giving rise to the so-called California cuisine, according to restaurant and food writers.

Published March 8, 1982

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